

CUBA I

Backgrounder -- December 31, 1962

QUESTION: Mr. President, do you expect trouble from the Cuban refugees in the Miami area now, and especially this Brigade, in view of this policy that we have towards Cuba?

THE PRESIDENT: I am sure they all want to get back to Cuba. That is quite natural. On the other hand, the United States has a good many other obligations and concerns and responsibilities all around the world. We are involved in attempting to check the advance of the Sino-Soviet block of a billion people, so that we have to maintain a perspective which is bound to be different from theirs.

I am sure that they want us to move into Cuba. So, naturally, when we don't, there is bound to be disappointment. They all want to go home. I understand that. So I suppose they will be disappointed until that day comes. I just think that day will come, but I don't know when it is going to come.

QUESTION: Mr. President, does our intelligence indicate any significant lessening of Castro's popularity or prestige as a result of Khrushchev's pullback?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I think it does, but I don't think it indicates any lessening of his ability. I think one of the most difficult problems that we have is that the Communist system does permit,

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even against substantial popular opposition, does permit a strong degree of central control, even though public support may atrophy. It is still possible, with a rather quiescent public to maintain, with the police apparatus, the militia, the youth groups, and all the rest, to maintain, even against a majority of public opposition, to maintain control.

We have seen that in several other countries. That doesn't mean that that control is final. After all we have been through in the last decade, we have been through the experience of East Germany, Poland, and Hungary, and if it hadn't been for Soviet troops, we would have had a complete change in all those three countries. In addition, we had the break between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. We had the difficulties between the Soviet Union and China.

As I say, no one can predict what the future course will be within and without Cuba. All we can indicate are the general lines today. As I say, those Cubans obviously want to go home. They left, hoping to return to a free Cuba. But we have to consider what kind of a Cuba we will have in the future. This has to represent a choice by the majority of the Cubans themselves. It can't be just a matter of a change imposed by United States force.

QUESTION: Mr. President, how does the release of the prisoners jibe with this policy?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I think in the first place -- I don't

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think that the kinds of assistance given to Cuba to get the prisoners out are decisive elements in the continuation of Castro's policy, baby foods, medications, and so on. That is not the great issue in Cuba.

Secondly, I think they were hostages and, therefore, always could be used to attempt to limit American policy. Their effort now that Castro is making that we won't release a certain number of relatives, unless Pan American begins to fly back again, that is the kind of use that he makes of prisoners. He had a particularly vulnerable target in the prisoners because of the American responsibility for their position.